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Depot Town Rag

Volume 14, Number 5 *"All the news in one block in one month."*

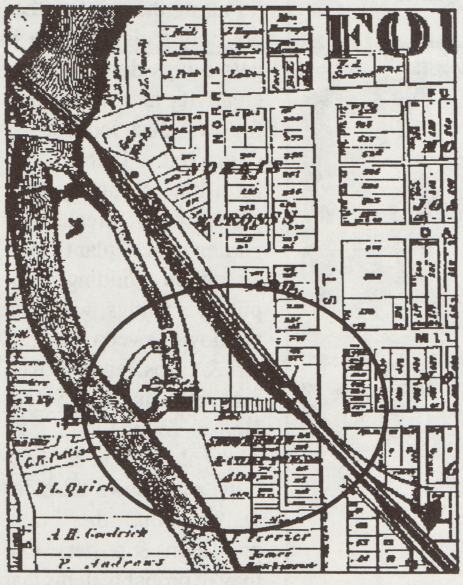
A Publication of the DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, MI 48198

100% FREE Rag content
May 1991

- **Signal Tower revived**
- Clean-up is May 4th
- The Erie Light
- *New sponsors' coupons*
- **Around the block with Bill**

. . . and other strictly local stuff

Sometimes *progress* means *not* changing



Careful inspection of the (above) **map** of this portion of the City of Ypsilanti from 1878 will show that most of the old railroad district hasn't really changed much and a few features which no longer exist certainly explain today's uniquenesses in Depot Town: the sluiceways which caused Frog Island, the railroad yard and roundhouse, even City Hall - just across the river from the depot.

All but the main line of Michigan Central's track have been removed in the past decade, but the trains still run. Also note that we were in the *Fourth* Ward ("FOU...") back then.

Most of the subdivision lot lines still exist, although nobody in the block speaks of Showerman and Compton much any more. Thanks to their foresight, though, we still have a neighborhood we can handle. If it was *two* blocks long, we'd probably be overwhelmed.

Some of the names from the 19th Century still exist. Follett, Norris, Gilbert, Hutchinson and Quirk are still among us, either in their progeny or their legacy; the names remain.

As the folks at Bob Evans' Farms like to say, "The way we were is the way we are."

Celebrating a decade of Jazz: Frog Island 1991

Unique three-day program enjoys ambience of Ypsi's lush parks and Depot Town

Friday, June 14 - New Orleans Night
- Percy Gabriel's New Orleans Jazz Band
- New Birth Brass Marching Band
- Terrence Siminen & the Mallet Playboys
- Buckwheat Zydeco

Saturday, June 15
- Bird of Paradise Orchestra
- RodneyWhittaker Octet
- Straight Ahead
- Kenny Garrett
- Showcase: Motor City Blues Queens Juanita McCray, Zoom, Thornetta Davis
- Chicago Blues Special with Albert King

Sunday, June 16
- Gospel Choir TBA
- Jay Caldwell & the Gospel Ambassadors
- From Haiti: The Bukman Experience
- and even more to be announced!

Tickets are available through The Ark, many Ann Arbor businesses and at participating Depot Town businessses.

Volunteers should connect via 761-1451

Sponsorship shared with The Ark

Jazz has been good to Depot Town. It paid for the billboards, the "welcome" sign, the banners and much more. Still, locals admit that it's nice to have The Ark buying out the concept over a three-year period. DTA will still operate fund-raising concessions, such as this year's program and parking, and local merchants may show their wares to a whole new weekend crowd with special offers related to the Festival's frog/green/jazz themes. Deadline for sponsors' listings is May 15. See page six for details.

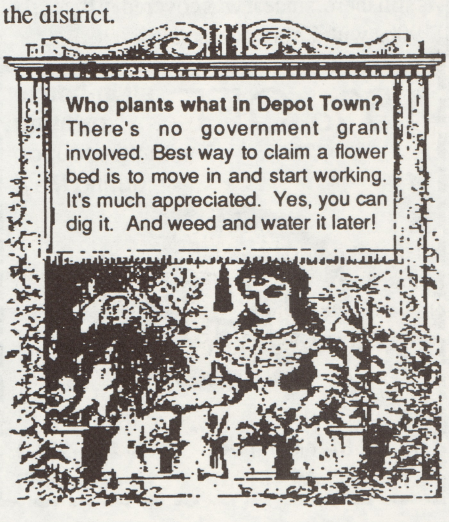
A more expanded opportunity for district promotion will be seen in the printed program at extra cost to advertisers both in and out of the district.

DDA still seeks unity

After collecting on a voluntary Ad Valorem tax for a year, the Depot Town Downtown Development Authority has amassed a total of $1707.22 out of a projected $2800 to be used to meet administrative expenses for the good of the district's public properties. This year's projection is $2965.

DDA appointees and five other interested citizens met last month for what has become a semi-annual meeting and decided to research "the most effective approach to unifying the DDA district by including City Body, Miller Motors, Olde Towne Coin & Gold and the Ninde Street garage. Ivan Harner, Rex Richie, and Bill French will work togther with the City Attorney and report.

Next meeting is July 11 at 8 pm in the Freighthouse Coffeeshop. All are welcome.


Who plants what in Depot Town?
There's no government grant involved. Best way to claim a flower bed is to move in and start working. It's much appreciated. Yes, you can dig it. And weed and water it later!

Practical *planfulness* pays off

You gotta have a plan. Everybody's making plans this month -- the Merchants' Committee, the Association and its many promotions (see minutes on page four), the DDA, the Central Business Community, Heritage Festival planning committee, the Antique Engine Club, Full Circle Community Center, the Visitors and Convention Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce and all of the attendant alphabet soup of our small town democracy — they're all making plans together.

All of this comes together to help create a commercial community that keeps its costs down by doing the promotional hustle themselves.

Being so full of plans and play seems a good idea for any community of cooperators in joint effort. General Motors makes plans. So do our political parties. We plan our weekends, our vacations and the next meal. Even Depot Town has a plan.

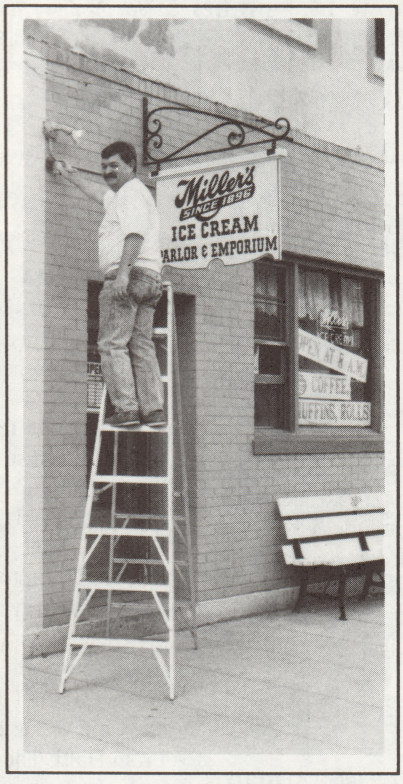
"After decades of decay" (as the song says), locals on this block got together and made a ten-year plan for the old railroad district. That was in 1976 and both the private and public sectors had accomplished their various reponsbilities in only eight years. Sure, a few individuals just sat tight and watched their profits mount as they benefited from the industry of others, but most people knew from the beginning that *everybody* never comes across. They planned on a few slackers and their opportunism kept a few run-down reminders of the 'good old days' in constant view for easy comparison. Their neighbors kept playing and planning together, nevertheless.

With no paid staff of professional promoters, Depot Town's activists continue to cooperate to bring special events into focus in what has been described as the Michigan Territory's original shopping mall.

This new theory of *planfulness* popped up in a session at the old caboose last month and the definition followed an exciting month of meetings, large and small, formal and informal. After another winter of *plotting* for the good of the district, spring's *planfulness* worked its way into a loose definition:

Planning: pragmatisim, ideas, strategies, decisions, action. *Playfulness:* fun, excitement, sometimes silly, always exhilarating.

Putting the two together not only feels good but it gets things done. Happy creativity and satisfaction follow. Just look at the checklist from this month's clean-up-the-block poster: create new garden space, plant flowers, paint building trim, put up awnings, wash the windows, sweep the gutters & curbs, repair broken concrete, dig the Signal House foundation, take down old posters & handbills, wash down the sidewalks, shine the brass, paint signs & posters. Oh, they're probably items that would have gotten done anyway, but just look at the promotional benefit the neighborhood gained by Planning To Do Them Together and making it all into a media event.

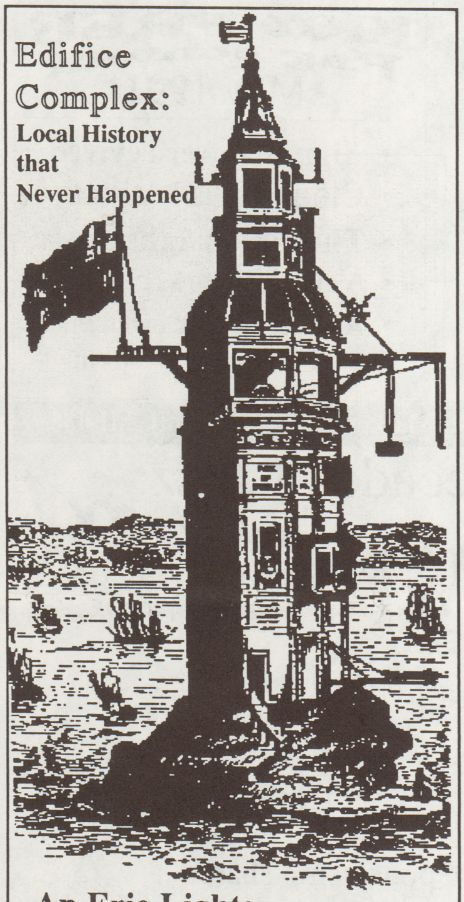


Dave Blackmer, of Miller's Ice Cream Parlor & Emporium, gets on the ladder to spiff up his shop's facade

One of the many mottos of Ypsi's old railroad district is "Firmly rooted in the past - with a clear view forward." The view from the old caboose cupola looks in all directions - into our rich past and way up the track into the future. Active Depot Town business folk know where their track leads and they are collectively anticipating lots of passengers boarding at the next station.

Again we prove that *planfullness* pays off.

Edifice Complex:
Local History that Never Happened



An Erie Light:

Pilots of boats from New York's Erie Canal watched through the night for the welcome signal of the Great Erie Light. Finding this aid to navigation determined whether the route would take the early travellers to the Maumee River and the fertile Ohio Valley or through The Straight *(French for Detroit)* and into the wilds of northern Michigan. Less careful navigators blundered up the Huron River to such exotic spots as Belleville, Snow's Landing, and Ypsilanti. Some of the more powerful boats made it as far as Dixboro, a full four miles from the river banks.

Many find it hard to believe that the light is still there, since it was covered in the early 1900s with Zebra Mussels.

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Fri. $1 off wash
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Expires: May 15, 1991

Support our sponsors of your monthly *Depot Town Rag*

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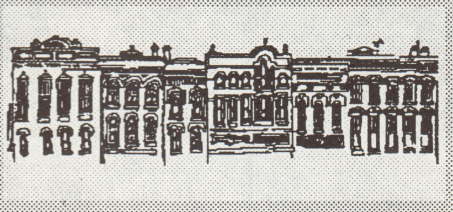
DEPOT TOWN
MERCHANT
Look for this logo in their window.

D.T.A. President's message:



One sunny afternoon in April I received a clue from our members on where to look for good ideas. It has been said by some that Depot Towners are a 'strange lot.' We didn't mind this label; in fact, most of us kind of liked it because it added to the mystique of Depot Town being different.

We most certainly are different. I started to walk the neighborhood to chat with the business and property owners to ask a simple and easy question: How do we prepare Depot Town and its businesses for the 1990's?

After the first few visits it was evident that before this walk was over, I was going to get enough great ideas that we could start the initial phase in accomplishing our stated goal of being 'the unique busienss district in Washtenaw County.'

Everyone had an idea. This diverse group of individual business owners had a slightly different perspective of what was needed to be done, but the common thread throughout this 'patchwork of ideas' was projects that could be done now. The first step of any journey must begin with the belief that you are going to reach your destination. We are going to reach ours!

Members' ideas included such projects as:

• On May 4th every business in Depot Town will attempt to spruce up their facades and call the media's attention to this tremendous visual image of ladders up and down Depot Town with people painting, hanging new awnings, building flower boxes, etc., generally making Depot Town look FRESH. In case you are not familiar with the word 'fresh,' being the father of teenagers, I know FRESH means it doesn't get any better than this.

• A joint fund-raiser between the DTA and Full Circle Community Center. The goal would be two fold: 1. Generate the necessary funds to provide Depot Town with similiar services as provided to the Central Business Community. 2. Educate more people to the contribution the Full Circle program makes to our community and its people. Their paid volunteers would be contributing to the ongoing enhancement of the City of Ypsilanti.

• Build a west entranceway to the Freighthouse.

• Light the amphitheater so churches, schools, and other groups could have an interesting and different setting for their choirs.

• Build the Signal Tower. The Depot Town Antique Engine Club has agreed to provide the labor if we can work out the details with the city.

• Build a kiosk indicating the location of Riverside Park, Frog Island, Huron River, Freighthouse, businesses in Depot Town and other points of historical interest.

There were other great ideas but the bottom line is I'm running out of column space.

Our *Depot Town Rag* editor, Tom Dodd, has always suggested individuals must 'sign on to projects' to get the work done. He is right. Consequently, these projects have all been 'signed on by individuals,' but we lack the green stuff: $$!

If our projects can stand up to the test of whether they will enhance the quality of life in Ypsilanti, the City of Ypsilanti could provide the necessary green stuff.

Are we too bashful to ask? I think not.

- Bill French, your Prez
The Depot Town Associaton, Inc.

It's happening in Ypsilanti's historic
DepotTown:

Saturday, May 4
Ypsi Area Street Rods' Ford Lake
12th annual *Show & Shine*
Kickoff Party in Depot Town: 7-9 pm

•

Saturday, May 18, 1991
Gus Macker Tournament
Depot Town Association (DTA),
Central Business Community (CBC), and
the Spirit of Ypsilanti present *a free concert:*
Little Sonny on the Cross Street Bridge

•

Spring Sidewalk Sale
Saturday, April 27

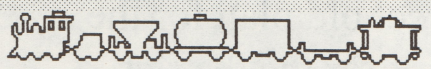
The Depot Town Association

is a nonprofit, tax exempt corporation dedicated to preserving the unique character and history of the Depot Town area and to ensuring the economic growth and stablity of the area.

Cut out and mail your dues to:
DTA, 400 Market Place,
Ypsilanti, MI, 48198.

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ ZIP _____
__ Associate member $10.
__ Business/Property member $25.
__ Sustaining member $100.
__ Please mail *The Rag* or __I'll pick it up.

Depot Town Association, Inc., 18 April 1991



DTA: Firmly rooted in the past - with a clear view forward!

Guests: Eight members of the Ypsi Area Street Rods; Amy McMillan, Ypsilanti Recreation Director; Peter Murdock, Ward 5 Councilmember; Robert Fox, creative spirit.

March minutes approved as published.

Treasurer's report deferred by birthday.

Bob Sears, of the **Ypsi Street Rods Club,** presented regarding their May 4th event. A DTA trophy will be presented at their May 5th show and JYRO/Ford Lake Park.

Frog Island pin design approved. 300 will be ordered at $5..25, retail. Program contents due tomorrow. Contract signed.

Rag Report: New sponsors. Possible expansion to more pages. Neighborliness works.

Heritage Fest: Plans include Antique Bicylcle Show, Contra Dance, Gospel music, Jazz tent, stage w/canopy & bleachers, parade an hour earlier, tractor pull, possible magincians - open mike, street musicians, pre-party at EMU's Sherzer Hall. (Fetters & Gross)

Freighthouse: Margaret Harner reports meetings with City officals re: family events - Fall Fair, August opening, more possbilities.

Communications:

- Proposal to City prioritizing public progests in the district.

- May 4 clean-up of district with press coverage of business and property owner cooparation, string quartet, brown bag luncheon.

Tribute to Tom: *Rag* editor feted with commemorative plaque as if he'd died or something.

April Sidewalk Sales on schedule, according to J&R Trading Post's Gerry Tillman.

Caboose maintenance should come out of Caboose monthly rental income. Conesensus.

Antique Engine Club volunteers to construct Signal Tower.

City Parks Commission members either resigned or too busy; we'll try again for attendance at subsequent meeting.

NAM Conference on "Neighborhood Power - Use It or Loose It" is June 7 & 8.

Best Yet Award: Judi Monaghan finally moved into the district.

Golden Goose Award: To the continued vandalizism of the concept of recycling.

NOTE: Regular readers of *The Rag* may have noticed subtle changes in this month's edition. We enjoy many new sponors and anticipate growing to more pages. Who knows? Maybe even eight sides next month!

Stick with us. We're out to prove that urban neighborhoods can still be loveable.

"Entrepreneur"

I have to get my dictionary to spell it — I cannot say it — but I *are* one!

Sometimes one must be impulsive and say, "Let's do it!" When my partners and I had the opportunity to rent 50 East Cross in Depot Town and had a week to come to a decision in order to advertise and become known in Depot Town during the Heritage Festival in August 1990, we had to weigh pros and cons on whether we should take a chance.

The store in Wayne had been open less than a year and it was our first venture as owners of a business. We had done well with that one but could we afford to open another one so soon and have time to do the job right?

We looked at the location, etc., during a rain storm and our contact with Tom and Bettie Dodd was by telephone, but we were so tempted, we could not turn it down.

My memories of Depot Town were from the time when it was pretty rough down here, but it's all changed now. We wondered if we should expand our new business into that neighborhood. Some of the best impulsive decisions are 'gut feelings' and this was one of the best.

Depot Town is one of the most exciting places in Michigan that we have seen. The antique stores, the restaurants, etc., draw exciting and interesting customers with the mixture of young persons from the colleges and the lovers of the historic setting. Fellow merchants are really freindly and active in promoting the area and our landlords, the Dodds, are very prominent in that area.

Thank you all for welcoming us and we are hopeful that we will be with you many years and can contribute to the Depot Town ambience. - Barbara Coleman, Crazy Barb's Too

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May 1991

Depot Towners are invited to participate in any or all of the following activities for the good of this old commercial district:

Depot Town Association
7:30 p.m. Thursday, 16
The Old Caboose

Depot Town Antique Engine Club
7:00 p.m. Thursday, 23
Freighthouse Coffeeshop

You can rent
The Old Caboose

for your party, meeting catered dinner, or special event . . .

($25 + $10 refundable deposit)
Call 483-4256.

THE DEPOT TOWN RAG

A publication of the Depot Town Association, Inc. a nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation dedicated to preserving the unique character of the neighborhood and to the enhancement of its business climate.

-Tom Dodd, editor

The Depot Town Association, Inc.
A. William French, president
c/o The Old Caboose
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There's new enthusiasm for Depot Town's old Signal Tower

Recent developments resurrect old plan for the replication of a new landmark for the district

The 1976 *Depot Town Preservation Plan,* by Richard Macias of Preservation Urban Design Incorportated, stated, "Community Development funds would be well spent by the city for the construction of a railroad signal tower. The structrue would serve as a "sign" for Depot Town, providing visual indentification and reinforcing a sense of neighborhood identity."

This Signal Tower plan just might be successful

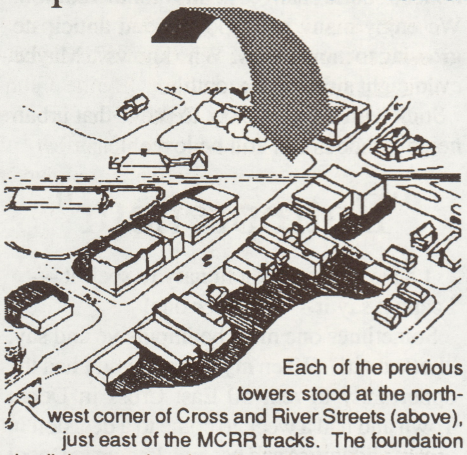
Every few years someone on the block dredges up the old plan to replace one of the railroad Signal Towers which stood at the crux of Cross, River and the railroad tracks. In the past, the planning stages seldom got past a few charming drawings. Other issues such as cost, construction and site quickly got in the way of that romantic dream for the district and the plan was scuttled until a new bunch of actives got on the Committee To Do Up-Beat Stuff For The Good Of The Block.

That committee is active again and, if this spring's enthusiasm is any indication, they just might succeed this time.

The original towers served as the controls for the safety gates which stopped traffic when the trains came through the crossing. Before the advent of the electrically operated gates and signals, the lever-and-weight-controlled gates were operated from the eight-way vantage point of the two-story frame tower at the intersection. There were even tiny gates across the sidewalks at one time.

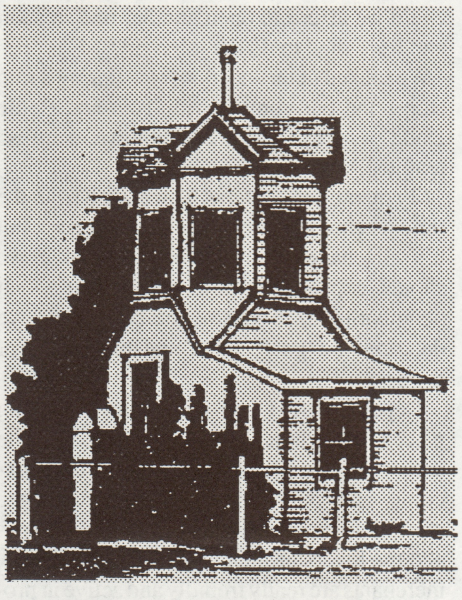
Several wags in the block can tell of the time when the operator dropped the gate on a driver's buggy. He was so enraged that he climbed up the tower's ladder to 'explain things' to the operator. The operator, however, was accustomed to such suggestions and kept extra weights ready to drop on the suggestee! And then he slammed the trap door shut.

Recent talks with the City (financing), the Antique Engine Club (construction), property owners (site possibilities) indicate that maybe this time the door won't be shut on one of the district's most exciting preservation projects.



Each of the previous towers stood at the northwest corner of Cross and River Streets (above), just east of the MCRR tracks. The foundation is all that remains since the train wreck of 1939.

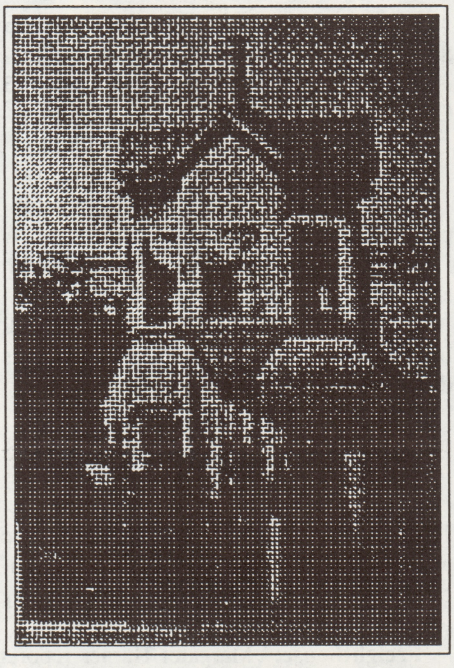
The only known photo (at right) of the orignal Signal Tower is from about 1892, showing a homemade parade float turning the corner on its way to Highland Cemetery. No one is quite sure what happened to this tower, but many in Ypsilanti can remember its replacement which stood here during their childhood.



Around the block with Bill

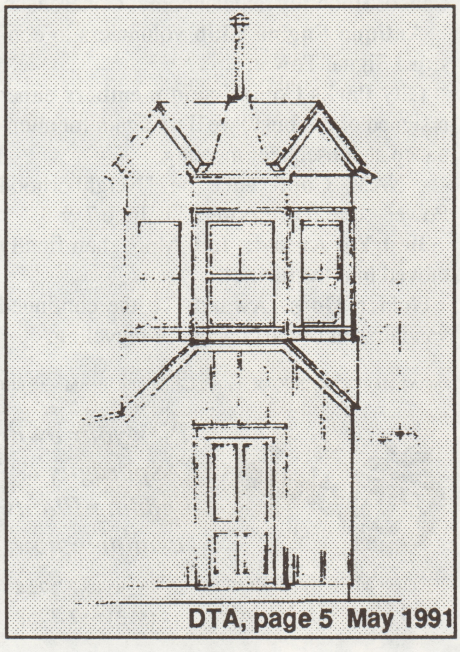
DTA president, Bill French, has continued another old tradition on the block - and that's the business of getting around and talking to all his neighbors - and he reports the highest single item they would like to see is the re-creation of the Signal Tower.

He also reports progress from meetings with City officials, the Antique Engine Club and the owners of the Depot on whose land the Signal Tower would sit. With all these irons in the fire, he hopes for positive final responses from all concerned. "After all," says Bill, "we're talking about building a landmark with no money on hand -- and on land we don't even own. That's kind of tricky."



The 1976 *Depot Town Plan* included the drawing, at left, of the original Signal Tower on its title page in an effort at "Defining Depot Town: Ypsilanti's depot area exists as a distinct, identifiable neighborhood. That it carries the familiar name *Depot Town* attests to this fact. Historically, the *east side* has had its own identity. How and why did it develop, separate from the Michigan Avenue business district? What is it that helps -- or could help -- to visually define the neighborhood today? . . . "

James Waite, a preservation architect for Colonial Williamsburg, was another local kid who has long dreamed of replicating the original Signal Tower back in his old home town. He sent construction blueprints (below) to the Association several years ago. When the Antique Engine Clubbers reviewed the drawings two years ago they responded with a hearty, "Heck; we could build that in a weekend!"



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A Depot Town SAMPLER

Jazz, Frog, & Green Specials

sought for the 10th annual Frog Island Jazz Festival

Rag sponsors' green/frog/jazz special themes for the weekend of June 14, 15, 16 will be featured in a special column next month.

Last year's specials saw such items as a commemorative license plate, frog straw hats, frogs' legs, green drinks and a bevy of green balloons in front of participating merchants' shops. The block looked festive and fun, and the jazz fans flocked to Depot Town businesses more than any other previous season.

Copy for such inclusions must be in the Old Caboose mail slot by Friday, May 10, in order to be set in type for the June issue.

All businesses are encouraged to decorate their shops with the jazz/frog/green theme, as well, to carry out the weekend's theme and draw hundreds of new customers to the block.

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